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ABSTRACT

Project PREPARE (Professional Renewal and Educational Preparation through Action Research Experiences) is a multi-year, collaborative effort between public schools, a regional intermediate school district, and a university. Its purpose is to develop a collaborative site of inquiry and practice where there is an emphasis on professional preparation, professional development, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. The project involves six components: target area teams; grade-level intervention assistance teams for at-risk students; teacher study groups in which teachers conduct action research projects about facets of their teaching; a summer school program for lower-achieving students; home-school partnerships; and a mentor-intern program. Some of the changes that have become obvious after the first year of the project's implementation include (1) a reduction in the number of referrals of students to special education; (2) positive changes in the instruction of many teachers who are engaged in studying their own practice through the teacher study groups; (3) the invigorating effect of having intern teachers in the classrooms; and (4) the development of a culture of collaboration. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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Project PREPARE: Collaborating for Professional Development and School Improvement

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Funded by the Michigan Office of Education, Department of Special Education, Project PREPARE (**P**rofessional **R**enewal and **E**ducational **P**reparation through **A**ction **R**esearch **E**xperiences) is a unique, multi-year collaborative effort between the Brookville Public Schools, the regional Intermediate School District (ISD), and Western Michigan University (WMU). The purpose of the project is to develop a collaborative site of inquiry and practice where there is an emphasis on professional preparation, professional development, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. Project PREPARE involves approximately 70 faculty, staff, and administrators of the Brookville Public Schools, nearly 800 students at the Brookville K-5 elementary buildings, several parent and community representatives, selected ISD personnel, and two WMU professors.

Project PREPARE grew out of a shared interest among faculty, staff, administration, and the community to better serve all children in the Brookville Public Schools. A rural community of less than 3,000 people, Brookville is located in Southwest Michigan near Lake Michigan. The diversity of the community is reflected in the student body of its schools. Between 10 and 15% of the students are children of migrant families and about 15% are African American. Additionally, approximately 60% of the students in the district qualify for free or reduced lunches. During recent years on the statewide assessment tests, Brookville students have consistently scored among the lowest in Southwestern Michigan. The ultimate goal of Project PREPARE is the creation of a collaborative site of inquiry and practice that promotes the professional development of the entire faculty and staff in order to maximally support the school achievement of all students, provide a unified teacher preparation experience, and create a culture of collaboration that emphasizes forms of disciplined inquiry to inform professional decision making. Project PREPARE works closely with the school district to provide an educational program that meets the needs of all children, a program where no child "slips through the cracks." The project's focus on improved teacher preparation and professional development reflects our underlying belief that improving schools requires better preparation of new teachers along with strong support for the continued growth of practicing teachers.

Project PREPARE draws upon many proven models of effective practice, including research conducted in Intervention Assistance and Transdisciplinary Teams (Whitten & Dieker, 1995), teacher-

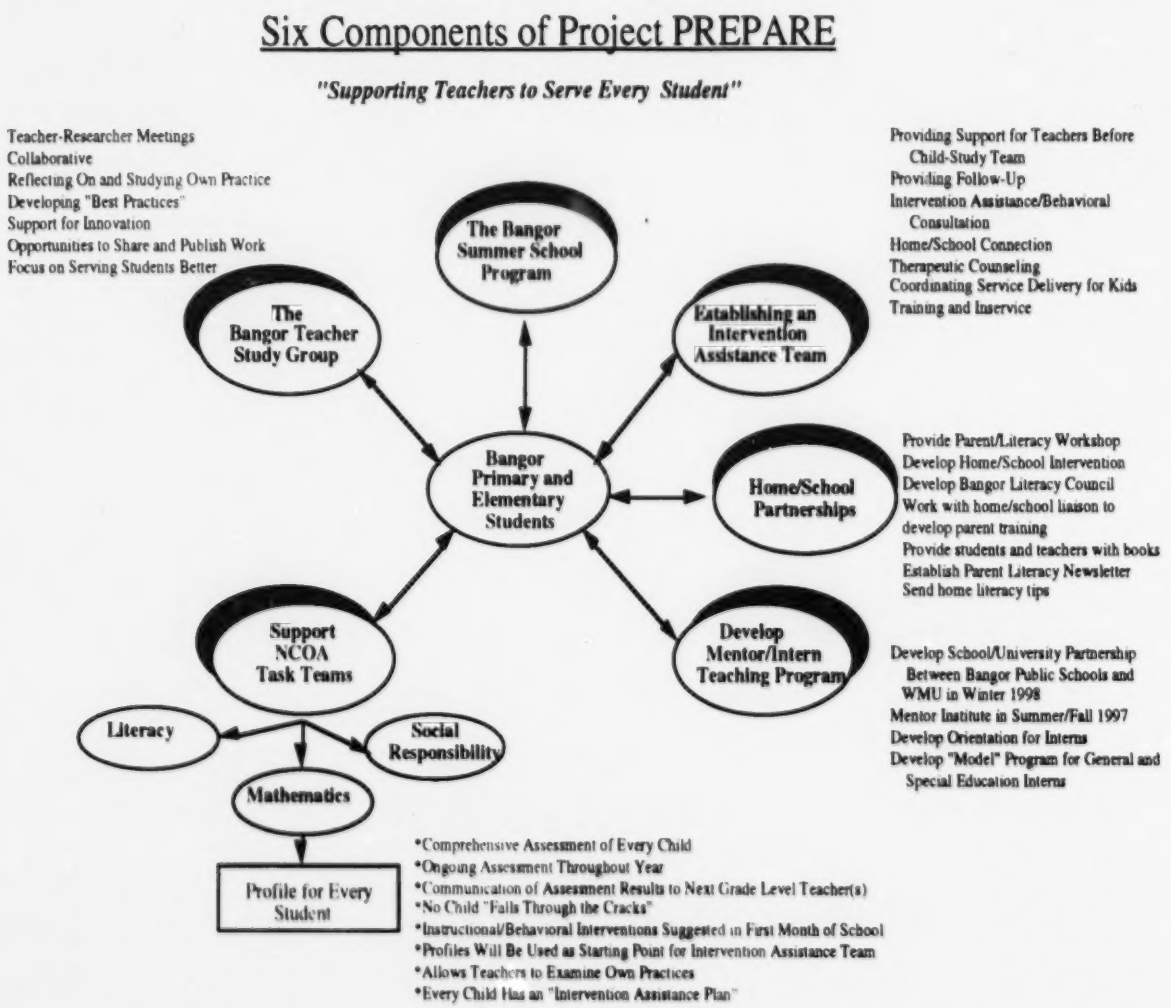
researcher communities (Englert & Tarrant, 1995), school/university partnerships for transforming teacher education (Clark, 1988; Goodlad, 1988; Osguthorpe, Harris, Harris, & Black, 1995), and literacy programs for children at-risk of school failure and those with mild impairments (Englert, Raphael, & Mariage, 1994; Englert, Mariage, Garmon, Rozendal, Tarrant, & Urba, 1996). While each of these lines of research has shown great promise, previously they have not all been combined into a framework that attempts to serve the needs of all children in an inclusive K-5 setting.

The development of Project PREPARE has also been guided by the research on educational change (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1991) and by what we have learned from our personal involvement in an earlier multi-year collaborative research project (Englert et. al, 1995). One of the understandings that we brought to Project PREPARE was the realization that changing teachers' beliefs and practices requires an over-time perspective. It is not realistic to expect meaningful and lasting changes to occur overnight. We now know, for example, that one-shot inservices for teachers are clearly inadequate (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1991), and sometimes even one year is not long enough for lasting changes in teachers' beliefs and practices to take hold (Englert & Tarrant, 1995). Another important understanding is that transmission models of professional development may be at odds with the nature of adult learning. As Elmore and McLaughlin explain, "External demand is largely ineffective in stimulating adult learning; the motivation to learn new things must come from within" (p. 42). Thus, change agents must be aware of and sensitive to teachers' interests and concerns, and they must help teachers find their own reasons for making changes. Third, from our experience on the Early Literacy Project (ELP), we have come to understand that teachers need to be given voice in curricular issues of interest and concern to them. Teachers seem to be more likely to buy into change efforts when they have some say and a sense of ownership in them (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1991). Fourth, we have learned that developing collaborative teacher-researcher communities can result in longer-lasting change (Englert & Tarrant, 1995). Having regular opportunites to share experiences, exchange ideas, and discuss differences in their beliefs with other members of the ELP community seemed to promote deeper learning by the teachers. These understandings about the nature of educational change have guided our thinking as we have endeavored to develop a project that will provide on-going professional development and support to

Brookville teachers over several years in an effort to help them become even more effective in achieving the goal of meeting the needs of all children.

The project consists of six different components: 1) target area teams, 2) intervention assistance teams, 3) teacher study groups, 4) summer school program, 5) home/school partnerships, and 6) mentor/intern program (see Figure 1). Several of these components are interrelated, and each of the six components are closely linked to the Brookville Board of Education Goals, the North Central Outcomes Accreditation (NCOA) goals, and the mission of the Brookville Public Schools. In this paper we will describe the development of the six components of Project PREPARE.

Figure 1


Six Components of Project PREPARE
"Supporting Teachers to Serve Every Student"
Teacher-Researcher Meetings
Collaborative
Reflecting On and Studying Own Practice
Developing "Best Practices"
Support for Innovation
Opportunities to Share and Publish Work
Focus on Serving Students Better
The Bangor Summer School Program
The Bangor Teacher Study Group
Establishing an Intervention Assistance Team
Providing Support for Teachers Before Child-Study Team
Providing Follow-Up
Intervention Assistance/Behavioral Consultation
Home/School Connection
Therapeutic Counseling
Coordinating Service Delivery for Kids
Training and Inservice
Bangor Primary and Elementary Students
Home/School Partnerships
Provide Parent/Literacy Workshop
Develop Home/School Intervention
Develop Bangor Literacy Council
Work with home/school liaison to develop parent training
Provide students and teachers with books
Establish Parent Literacy Newsletter
Send home literacy tips
Support NCOA Task Teams
Develop Mentor/Intern Teaching Program
Develop School/University Partnership Between Bangor Public Schools and WMU in Winter 1998
Mentor Institute in Summer/Fall 1997
Develop Orientation for Interns
Develop "Model" Program for General and Special Education Interns
Literacy
Social Responsibility
Mathematics
Profile for Every Student
*Comprehensive Assessment of Every Child
*Ongoing Assessment Throughout Year
*Communication of Assessment Results to Next Grade Level Teacher(s)
*No Child "Falls Through the Cracks"
*Instructional/Behavioral Interventions Suggested in First Month of School
*Profiles Will Be Used as Starting Point for Intervention Assistance Team
*Allows Teachers to Examine Own Practices
*Every Child Has an "Intervention Assistance Plan"

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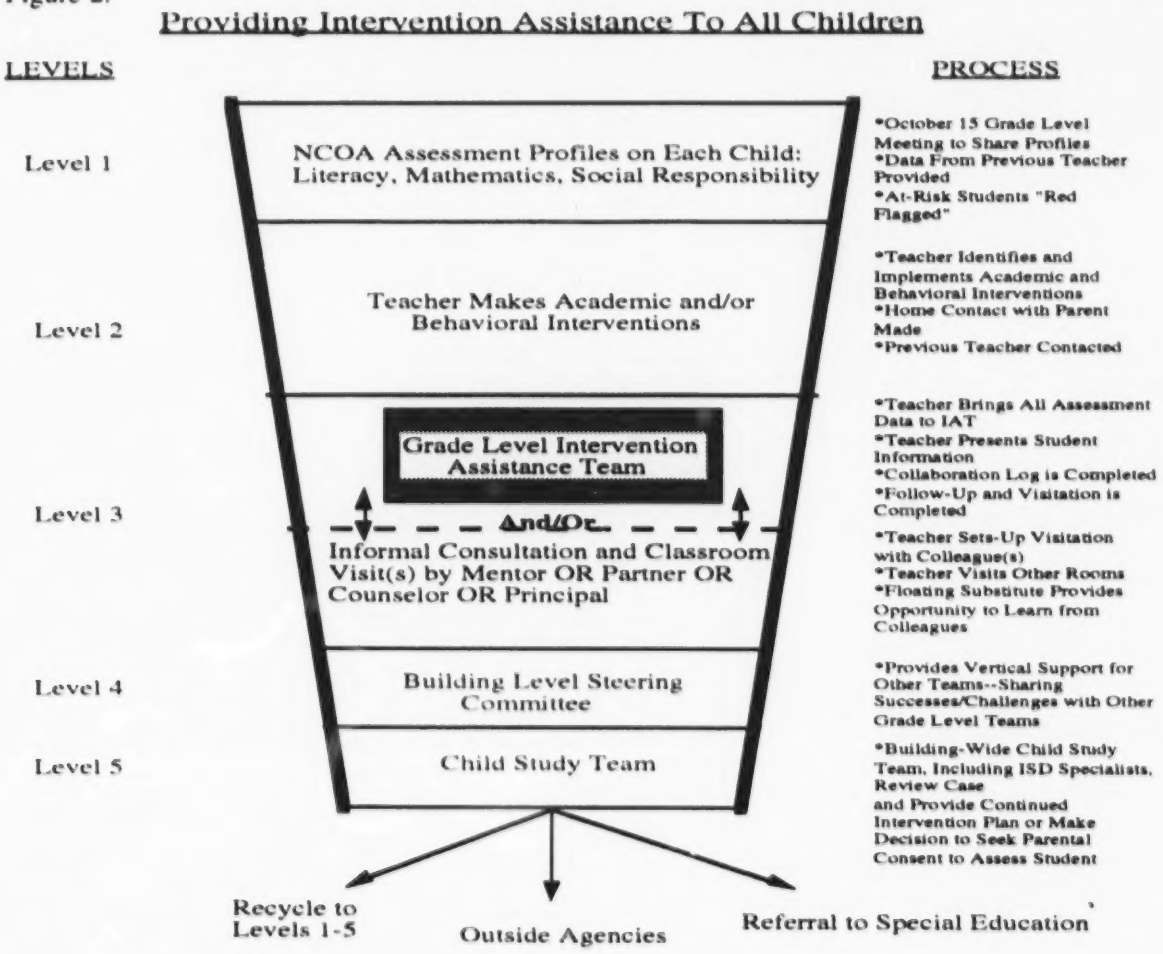
North Central Outcomes Accreditation Process. In the two years prior to the origination of Project PREPARE, as part of the school district's North Central Outcomes Accreditation process, each building conducted a comprehensive needs assessment and identified several target areas in which to focus their school improvement efforts. At the Primary and Elementary buildings, the target areas identified were literacy, mathematics, and social responsibility. For each of these areas a Target Area Team--composed of faculty, administrators, parents, and staff--was formed at each building to further study the identified needs in the area and to develop improvement plans. Furthermore, to reach the district goal of meeting the needs of every child, each Target Area Team has been charged with the responsibility for developing a profile of each student in each of the three target areas. These profiles will then allow the faculty to better tailor instruction to each student's individual needs and provide progressive monitoring of the student's growth as they proceed through the Brookville Public Schools. Project PREPARE is supporting this process through participation of the project directors on individual Target Area Teams at the Primary and Elementary buildings and through consultation with the teams. In addition, we have arranged joint meetngs between the Target Area Team leaders of the two buildings in order to facilitate communication and the alignment of goals between the buildings.

Two of the key research questions for this component of the project are the following: (1) What are the processes that occur and products that are developed by the literacy, mathematics, and social responsibility target area teams across grades K-5? (2) What are the average gains in student achievements? To address the first question, we are examining artifacts developed by the various target area teams and analyzing our fieldnotes from target team meetings and from informal interviews with teachers. To address the second question, we are analyzing students' standardized test results.

Grade Level Intervention Assistance Teams. During our planning year we learned that when students in the Brookville Schools were having academic or behavioral difficulties but were not judged eligible for special education, there was no mechanism for addressing these students' needs. Consequently, many of the teachers were feeling frustrated and unsupported, and a sizable number of students were not having their needs met. As a means of addressing this situation, a model for an intervention assistance team (IAT) at each grade level was implemented during the 1997-1998 school year (see Figure 2). The building schedules were arranged so that teachers of the same grade level all have a common planning time. The Grade Level Intervention Assistance Teams meet on a biweekly

basis to discuss possible academic and/or behavioral interventions for any student referred by a team member. The teachers in both buildings have received inservice training in communication skills and in how to conduct intervention assistance team meetings. In addition, the consultant who provided the training has been available for follow-up consultations throughout the school year and will also help the various teams to engage in self-study of their teaming skills. The IAT model is innovative not only because it provides a regular occasion for teachers to work collaboratively in helping one another to better serve their most challenging students, but also because the teachers receive training and support

Figure 2.


Providing Intervention Assistance To All Children
LEVELS
PROCESS
Level 1
NCOA Assessment Profiles on Each Child: Literacy, Mathematics, Social Responsibility
•October 15 Grade Level Meeting to Share Profiles
•Data From Previous Teacher Provided
•At-Risk Students "Red Flagged"
Level 2
Teacher Makes Academic and/or Behavioral Interventions
•Teacher Identifies and Implements Academic and Behavioral Interventions
•Home Contact with Parent Made
•Previous Teacher Contacted
Level 3
Grade Level Intervention Assistance Team
And/Or
Informal Consultation and Classroom Visit(s) by Mentor OR Partner OR Counselor OR Principal
•Teacher Brings All Assessment Data to IAT
•Teacher Presents Student Information
•Collaboration Log is Completed
•Follow-Up and Visitation is Completed
•Teacher Sets-Up Visitation with Colleague(s)
•Teacher Visits Other Rooms
•Floating Substitute Provides Opportunity to Learn from Colleagues
Level 4
Building Level Steering Committee
•Provides Vertical Support for Other Teams--Sharing Successes/Challenges with Other Grade Level Teams
Level 5
Child Study Team
•Building-Wide Child Study Team, Including ISD Specialists, Review Case and Provide Continued Intervention Plan or Make Decision to Seek Parental Consent to Assess Student
Recycle to Levels 1-5
Outside Agencies
Referral to Special Education

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in developing their teaming and communication skills so that they may become more effective collaborators. Having a structure and a process in place for engaging in regular, constructive problem-solving dialogue with one another should facilitate the development of a culture of collaboration among the teachers.

The key research questions on this component of Project PREPARE are the following: (1) How do the grade level intervention assistance teams function? (2) What are the successes and challenges encountered by the various grade level intervention assistance teams? (3) What are the characteristics of the more effective and less effective teams? (4) What impact to the intervention assistance teams have on teachers' practices and on special education referral rates?

The data sources that we are using to address these questions include field notes and videotapes of intervention assistance team meetings, records of teaming meetings, questionnaires on teachers' perceptions of the intervention assistance teams, focus groups and informal interviews with teachers, and school data on the number of student referrals to special education

Teacher Study Groups. A teacher study group was organized in each of the two buildings and has met on a biweekly basis since January, 1997. The purpose of the study groups, each of which is led by one of the project directors, is to encourage and also support teachers' disciplined inquiries into facets of their teaching practice. Teachers in the study groups develop, implement, and evaluate their own action research projects. When their projects are completed, not only are the teachers invited to share their findings with other faculty and with school administrators, but also individuals who express interest in presenting their research at professional conferences or through publications are encouraged to do so. The study groups enable teachers not only to learn more about disciplined inquiry but also to have the opportunity to work collaboratively with fellow teachers in studying their own practice. Furthermore, the study groups support participants' on-going professional development through providing a context where teachers can feel comfortable sharing their successes and challenges, taking risks in altering their current practice, and learning from their colleagues. Project PREPARE further supports teachers' research through providing funds for researh-related materials, released time, and attendance at professional conferences or workshops.

We gave two major research questions on the teacher study group component: (1) What types of action-research projects do teachers attempt and how successfully are they implemented?

(2) What evidence is there of the internalization, transformation, and application in classroom practice of knowledge gained from participating in the Brookville Teacher Study Groups? Our data sources for this component include fieldnotes and audiotapes of meetings, participants' projects, informal interviews with teachers and observations in their classrooms, and participants' written evaluations of the study groups.

Summer School. As a means of providing additional learning opportunities to the lower-achieving students in the K-5 buildings, a summer school program has been initiated using Title I funds, along with some funding from PREPARE. Slightly over 100 students were served during the first summer school, and this number more than doubled this past summer. The summer school program at targeted at students who are achieving in the lowest third of the school population. The summer curriculum is intended to reinforce and enrich the regular curriculum, with a heavy emphasis put upon building students' literacy and mathematics skills. However, rather than focusing on more traditional skill and drill practices, the summer school endeavors to provide students with cutting edge instruction in a stimulating and enjoyable learning environment as a means of improving students' attitudes toward school. Also involved in the summer school are WMU master's students who are completing their intern teaching requirement for their special education teaching certification. These interns' involvement in the summer school benefits everyone involved--the interns, the classroom teachers, and the students. The interns benefit because they are able to complete their internship during the summer months without having to take time away from their regular teaching job. The classroom teachers benefit because, in addition to their paraprofessional aide, they will have another teacher in the classroom with them; plus, working with a special education intern will give each teacher the experience of co-teaching. Finally, the students, who have been identified as the most needy in the district, will benefit because they will have three adults in their classroom to help them. In addition to serving the lowest-achieving students, the summer school serves a professional development function for the teachers, as they are in-serviced in best teaching practices and models of co-teaching (Dynak, Whitten, & Dynak, 1996) for a full week prior to the start of the summer school, along with having half-day inservices one day each week during the seven weeks of summer school.

In the summer school component of the project, we are focusing on three primary research questions: (1) What impact does an innovative summer school program have on the achievement of

participating students? (2) What impact does participating in an innovative summer school program have on the instructional beliefs and practices of teachers? (3) What are teachers' and interns' perceptions of the co-teaching models employed during the summer school? The data that we are analyzing in order to address these questions include our fieldnotes taken as participants/observers in the summer school, anecdotal and informal interview data from conversations with teachers, access to formal and informal student achievement data, and formative and summative evaluations (e.g., reflective journals, end-of-summer focus group).

Home/School Partnership. It was recognized early in our planning year that if we were to be ultimately successful in improving achievement for all students in the Brookville Public Schools, it was necessary to engage parents and community members as partners in the education process. The demographic characteristics of the Brookville Public Schools placed a majority of students in various "at-risk" categories, suggesting a need to expand educational opportunities beyond the school. An innovative aspect of our efforts to build stronger home/school partnerships will be the development of Brookville Literacy Council, which will be a collaborative group of parents, faculty, staff, administrators, home/school counselors, librarians, and other members of the community. This group will oversee various activities intended to promote the literacy development of all students. For instance, the council will develop an incentive program which will allow children to earn free books through submitting a monthly reading log that indicates the books that a child has read or has been read to by the parent. Another innovative feature is that Project PREPARE will work closely with teachers at Brookville Primary to identify their lowest-achieving students and then we will work with the teacher, the students, and the students' parents to develop and implement strategies designed to accelerate the students' literacy learning.

We have two key research questions for this component of the project: (1) What is the nature of teacher and parent involvement in the implementation of various activities intended to improve the communication and coordination between the school and the home? (2) Does student achievement appear to be affected by the implementation of activities intended to strengthen the home/school partnership? Because this component of the project is only in the beginning stages of its development, we have collected little data up to this point. However, during the coming year the data sources we

anticipate using include fieldnotes taken from being participants/observers in the activities, anecdotal and informal interview data from conversations with teachers and parents, and access to formal and informal student achievement data.

Mentor/Intern Program. Brookville Public Schools has been accepted as a site for the placement of WMU intern teachers. Project PREPARE is attempting to develop Brookville as a model teacher preparation site through piloting a number of innovative projects and experiences. First, each intern is required to complete a Student Intervention Project, which requires them to identify in their classroom a student who is challenging in some way. They are to observe this student and obtain baseline data on him/her, and then they are to design and implement an intervention intended to address the student's particular problem. A second unique experience for Project PREPARE interns is that they will have the opportunity not only to sit in on the grade level intervention assistance team meetings, but they also have the opportunity to bring to this team the child whom they are focusing on for their Student Intervention Project. Thus, the interns should leave their linternship with a better understanding of the teaming process and of how to work effectively with special needs students than will their counterparts who have interned in traditional general education settings. In addition, we are endeavoring to provide opportunities for general education interns to work closely, for a period of time, with special education teachers. Furthermore, the interns are encouraged to participate in the teacher study group and the target area team meetings. Hopefully, these interns will carry the knowledge they gain from these experiences to the schools where they are eventually employed and will be able to share their understandings with their new colleagues.

We have two primary research questions for this component of the project: (1) What do intern teachers learn as a result of participating on the grade level intervention assistance teams, completing the Student Intervention Project, and being involved in the VBISD Special Education Day? (2) What do mentor teachers learn from having an intern in their classrooms? Our data sources to address these questions include our fieldnotes from observations and meetings with interns and mentors, informal interviews with interns and mentors, focus groups, and mentor and intern evaluations of their internship experiences.

Because Project PREPARE has just completed its first year of full implementation, we are now in the process of analyzing the data we have collected on its various components. Thus, though hard data to support our impressions of the project are still forthcoming, we nevertheless believe, based on our day-to-day involvement with the Brookville schools over the past year and a half, that this project has already become a powerful intervention for students and teachers of the district. For example, we have already observed a reduction in the number of referrals of students to special education, and we have also seen some important positive changes in the instruction of many of the teachers who are engaged in studying their own practice through the teacher study groups. In addition, the presence of intern teachers in classrooms during the regular school year and during the summer school appears to have had an invigorating effect on many of the teachers. Finally, as teachers have had increased opportunities to talk and work cooperatively with one another, we see evidence that a culture of collaboration is beginning to develop in the two buildings.

We believe that the Project PREPARE model has educational significance, in several different ways. First, this project embodies a truly systemic approach to professional development and school reform. The project is multi-faceted and endeavors to actively involve all of the various stakeholders in the school district, including teachers, administrators, parents, students, and other members of the local community. Second, the project offers a sustainable model of school reform. One of the problems with many school reform efforts is that once the money and the researchers are withdrawn from a setting, the intervention does not persist. In Project PREPARE, however, the components have been designed with the idea of assuring that they will be sustainable once the funding and the researchers are gone. Finally, this project offers multiple entry points for teachers to begin engaging in professional development. The six components of the model enable teachers to become involved in different ways and to different extents, and yet each of these components is designed to contribute to our overarching goals of ensuring the success of all students, developing a culture of collaboration, and promoting teachers' on-going professional development.

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